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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 006478

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM TH

SUBJECT: CONSERVATIVE JURIST BECOMES PRESIDENT OF THAI LEGISLATURE

Classified By: Political Officer David R. Greenberg, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The National Legislative Assembly (NLA) on October 24 elected conservative jurist Meechai Ruchupan as its President, despite widely publicized criticism of Meechai for various reasons, including his association with deposed Prime Minister Thaksin and with the military coup leaders in 1991. The Thai Rak Thai party's Acting Leader predicted Meechai's election will lead to further friction with activists, particularly People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) leader Sondhi Limthongkul. While the interim constitution provides that the NLA carries out all legislative functions, it is unclear whether the NLA will seek to pass a wide range of laws. Irrespective of who holds the NLA presidency, a genuine system of checks and balances will have to wait until the next constitution and elections. End Summary.

MEECHAI IN A LANDSLIDE

¶2. (C) In an October 24 vote for the presidency of the NLA, NLA members chose Meechai by an overwhelming margin; Meechai won 167 votes, compared with 47 for his closest competitor, Prasong Soonsiri. The vote took place after days of vocal criticism of Meechai's candidacy by NGOs and civil society groups. These critics noted Meechai's involvement in drafting the interim constitution issued by the Council for Democratic Reform, which staged the September 19 coup. He also was involved in drafting the interim constitution following the 1991 coup by the National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC), as well as significant orders and announcements issued by the NPKC. Meechai played a pivotal role in the issuance of the 1992 Emergency Decree on Amnesty, following a violent crackdown by the security forces against protesters in May 1992. He also was criticized for having worked on Thaksin's behalf in recent years; some in civil society see Meechai as lacking principles, because he has used his legal talents to assist anyone in a position of power.

¶3. (SBU) Because of Meechai's background, NGOs complained that, if he became Assembly President, the NLA would not be independent and would not serve as a proper check on the power of the interim administration. Meechai's supporters, on the other hand, cited his reputation as one of Thailand's

foremost legal figures, and his prior service as Speaker of the Senate. The Thai-language press coverage of Meechai's victory was mixed, with some newspapers denouncing the vote as having been rigged by the coup leaders.

THAI RAK THAI LEADER WARNS OF CONFLICT

¶ 14. (C) In an October 24 lunch with the Ambassador and EAP DAS John (septel), Thai Rak Thai Acting Leader Chaturon Chaiseng, on hearing of Meechai's election, said this development portended further conflict between the CNS and activists, especially People's Alliance for Democracy top figure Sondhi Limthongkul. Chaturon noted that Sondhi had backed Prasong Soonsiri (himself a highly controversial figure) in the contest for the NLA presidency; Sondhi also had requested assistance (NFI) from the Council for National Security (CNS) and failed to receive it, Chaturon claimed. (Note: According to press reports, approximately 100 people held a protest outside the NLA at mid-day on October 24, criticizing the body as a rubber stamp and also denouncing "the dictators who robbed democracy and tore down the constitution." Media reports identified the demonstrators as part of a loose network against the September 19 coup. End Note.)

NLA ROLE REMAINS UNCLEAR

¶ 15. (SBU) The interim constitution provides that the NLA performs the functions traditionally assigned to both houses of the National Assembly. It remains unclear whether the NLA will actively seek to pass new legislation, or whether most initiatives will be suspended for the duration of the interim administration. However, the NLA will have to establish the

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legal framework for the next election, within the parameters established by the next constitution. The interim constitution allows only the cabinet -- not NLA members -- to introduce legislation related to financial matters, including taxation and the allocation of state funds. The interim constitution provides that NLA members may interpellate cabinet ministers, but ministers may refuse to answer questions if they believe it would be inappropriate to discuss matters pertaining to national security or vital national interests. The interim constitution prohibits the NLA from passing a no-confidence vote pertaining to members of the cabinet.

COMMENT

¶ 16. (C) Meechai's selection as NLA President runs the risk of alienating the NGO/civil society groups who initially accepted the coup, but which are growing more concerned about the way the CNS is handling the transition back to democratic government. Meechai's main rival in the race, Prasong Soonsiri, was also closely associated with the CNS. No matter who became NLA President, it was clear all along that a genuine system of checks and balances will have to await the outcome of the next constitution and elections. End Comment.

BIO NOTES

¶ 17. (SBU) Meechai Ruchupan, born in February 1938, studied law at Thammasat University in Bangkok and also received a Master's degree from Southern Methodist University. After years of working as a government legal advisor, he became a member of parliament in the mid-1970s. He served as Minister Attached to the Prime Minister's Office in several cabinets formed by Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda in the 1980s. He also held cabinet positions under Prime Ministers Chatichai Choonhavan and Anand Panyarachun, and he served two terms as Senate Speaker. His wife holds the royal title of "Khunying."

BOYCE